PRACTICAL DERMATOLOGY

Empowerment in Dermatology∗

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Abstract The term empowerment refers to any process that facilitates behavioral changes and encourages responsibility and making informed choices. The concept has been applied mainly to help patients with chronic conditions achieve therapeutic goals. The aim of the approach in health care is to enhance self-caring and self-efficacy. The term derives from the English verb to empower meaning ‘‘to give (someone) the authority or power to do something’’ or ‘‘to make an individual or a group stronger or more powerful’’. One of the responsibilities of health professionals is to improve patients’ knowledge and their ability to choose between the different alternatives available to them so that they can act accordingly. In this article, we review the various definitions of the term empowerment, the tools used to measure patient empowerment, the implications of the concept for the management of chronic disease, and its use in dermatological conditions.

PALABRAS CLAVE
Empoderamiento; Adherencia terapéutica; Relación médico-paciente; Psoriasis; Control emocional

Resumen El término empoderamiento (empowerment) se refiere a un proceso que facilita el cambio conductual, favorece la responsabilidad y la toma de decisiones informadas de los pacientes principalmente en patologías crónicas para alcanzar objetivos terapéuticos. El empoderamiento se orienta a fomentar el autocuidado en salud y la autoeficacia. El término proviene del inglés empower que significa «dar poder» o «hacer poderoso o fuerte a un individuo o grupo». Es tarea de los profesionales de la salud facilitar los mejores conocimientos y habilidades para que el paciente sea capaz de escoger entre las opciones que tiene al alcance y actuar...

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Introduction

For some years now, the term empowerment has been used frequently in care models for patients with chronic diseases. The Real Academia de la Lengua Española defines the Spanish verb empoderar as an archaic variant of the verb apoderar and as a form derived from the English verb to empower. The dictionary definition of the Spanish term is “To make an individual or a group stronger or more powerful”. The literal meaning would be to “give power”, which is not the same as to strengthen or to encourage. Consequently, the correct Spanish term is and should be empoderar (to empower).

The origins of empowerment philosophy can be found in the approach to popular education developed in the 1960s on the basis of the work of Paulo Freire. The participatory approach, which emerged in the field of development in the 1970s, is a process that seeks to reduce the vulnerability and enhance the capacities of poor and marginalized populations in order to promote sustainable human development in these communities. In the mid-1980s, a network of women’s groups and academics (DAWN) were the first people to use the term to refer to the process through which women could gain control over symbolic and material resources and strengthen their capabilities and roles in all areas.

Initially, the term was used to frame the rights and needs of groups that were vulnerable due to discrimination on the grounds of sex, race, or sexual orientation. Although the term empowerment is applicable to all vulnerable social groups or any group that is a victim of marginalization, both its origin and its broadest practical application are found in the field of women’s rights.

Today, the concept of empowerment is used in a wide range of contexts. The interpretations of the term come from different disciplines, ranging from psychology and philosophy to the health sciences.

Empowerment and Health

In health care, the term empowerment refers to a process that facilitates behavioral change and helps patients to take responsibility for their own health and to make informed choices—mainly in the areas of nutrition, physical activity and adherence to treatment—in order to achieve treatment goals. The aim of empowering patients is to foster self-care and self-efficacy.

The World Health Organization (WHO) defines empowerment as “a process through which people gain greater control over decisions and actions affecting their health”. They go on to say: “To achieve this, individuals and communities need to develop skills, have access to information, and resources, and opportunities to have a voice and influence the factors affecting their health and well-being”.

In 2012, the WHO Regional Office for Europe published Health 2020, a policy framework document that establishes the strategy and identifies the priority areas for policy action for Europe in health matters up to the year 2020. One of the goals defined by this policy document is to empower citizens and patients.

In the context of health care, the term empowerment was first used as a guiding principle that should inform all interventions that promote better health. Later, the approach was used as a way to increase patients’ autonomy and participation in decisions about their health. More recently, however, some authors have started using the term to refer to strategies designed to help patients with chronic diseases to participate in and take responsibility for their own care and treatment, in order to improve health outcomes and, as a secondary goal, to control healthcare costs.

Numerous definitions of empowerment exist in the context of health economics (Table 1). They define empowerment as the social process of recognizing, promoting, and enhancing the patients’ ability to meet their own needs, solve their own problems, and feel that they are in control of their own lives.

Empowerment is achieved by way of 5 principal steps:

1. Explore which aspects of the condition represent a problem for the patient.
2. Clarify the patient’s feelings and the implications of their emotions: What does the patient think and feel about his or her situation?
3. Develop a plan: What needs to change? What options or resources are available to the patient?
4. Commit to action. Help the patient to understand the effort they will have to make and assess their commitment: What will the patient do and when?
5. Evaluate the process. Discuss the results and what the patient learned. Find out whether they encountered obstacles. Decide on the course of action for future interventions.

Through these 5 steps, the empowerment process explores the patient’s emotional response to their situation, works on ways to resolve the problems identified, and sets behavioral goals and targets. Obviously, there are certain prerequisites to success in this process and it will not be possible to empower a patient if these are not met:

- The patients must have certain abilities: They must accept their condition and have the necessary intellectual capacity to understand and engage with the disease
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